

COLFAX COBBLESTONES

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John Rambottini’s walk through Colfax, California, in the early 1920s, part 2

***Editor’s note:** This is part 2 of a reminiscence by John Alfred Rambottini. Part 1 was published in the December 2021 issue of Colfax Cobblestones. Mr. Rambottini describes his day off, walking around downtown Colfax, California. He recorded this in February 1987, when he was 85 years old. Because it was transcribed from a recording, some of the names may be spelled incorrectly.*

At the end of part 1, John had crossed Grass Valley Street from the Corner Store and had paused to collect his thoughts next to what had once been Big Foot Murphy’s Saloon but was now a soda fountain.

Next door, there was Art Cunningham’s hardware store. He had the first radio I’d ever seen, sitting out on the street with a big old, crooked horn, belching out something that you couldn’t understand. I’d say, “Art, when are you getting one of these things that speak English?”

He says, “I don’t know. Whenever they make one, I might get one. This damn thing sounds like a goggle of geese with Whooping Cough.” So, he laughed a bit and then I’d continue down.

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Next door would be either a library or a dry good’s store. But I think it was a library. No one in there. So, I pass it.

Next door was the little telephone office. Little Rosy Beroli, she was always in there, a good-looking girl. I’d step in the door and say, “Good morning.”

She’d say, “Well, good morning.” Then we’d have a pleasant word or two. “Well, I’ll see you later.” And I’d continue down.

Next door was the pool hall, old John Pomroy. He was always alone at that time of the morning. He’d always call me in. “Hey, come and have a Coke with me.” So, I’d go in the pool hall, set down at the card table and would have a Coke. Then I’d put the bottle in the case. “Well, I’ll see you later, John.”

“Oh, yeah.”

So, I walk on down to Tony Perry’s No. 1 fruit and vegetable stand. There was old Tony Perry. He was always walking either to the truck or from the truck with his shirt tail hanging out, hair was never combed. “Good morning, Tony.”

“Hey, good morning, Johnny.” He didn’t have much to say. So, I go on down.

Next door was an old shop, state highway used it for a repair shop. They didn’t have a repair shop then. So, there was old Walter Barnes and Charlie

Webber. They were either working around an old truck or fixing a tire or getting ready to go out. I'd stop and have a few words with them and on down the street.



John Alfred Rambottini and his wife, Daisy. Year unknown. John was a member of the Auburn Whiskerinos, "a fun-filled fraternal fixture in Auburn since the 1930s." Its members joined the Auburn Native Sons of the Golden West in 2002, according to a 2004 article in the *Auburn Journal*. The Whiskerinos sponsored beard-growing competitions to celebrate 49er culture. Photo from the CAHS Archives.

Next door would be Mrs. Dely. Ruth and Owen Dely. They had a cleaning establishment, clothes and what have you. He was sort of a tailor. They were very pleasant people.

Down below that, O. E. Williams had his little shop where he kept his little delivery truck. Poor little old Swede Johnson. He was trying to get his little Model T truck started to get it out on the little delivery route.

Down below him there was a Soda Works, old Carl Bell's Colfax Soda Works. It was operated by a fellow by the name of Frank Rose. That was always good for a bottle of Coke of some kind, orange juice or something. I'd have a bottle there.

Next door was Marson's barber shop. He was another jolly old fellah. He was always happy, Ozzie Marson, that's Bob's father. He was always in the door, looking for customers. He never talked much.

Then, next to Marson's there was O. E. Williams' grocery store. There was a character worked in there, Lloyd Newman. He was the clerk. Here I'll stop, pause a moment, and have a few words about some old character he used to hang around with.

This old fella's name was Cooper. Some people called him Coop, some people used to call him Old Pig Pen, and some called him Fly-blow. His real name would be Cooper. He'd tie his old horse to a power-pole beside the store, and he'd go in and gather stuff for his pigs in a box. He had the horse out there with two barrels on the wagon and he'd seem to pause around there, you know, linger around the store. The store had a little island in the center, where you could walk around it, with a little display of items on the shelves.

They had sacks of potatoes, maybe a sack of beans, or probably a sack of onions here and there. They had these canned goods, and cases of eggs. Old Cooper, he'd walk around this little island.

Lloyd was kind of watching him one day. He saw old Cooper there. He paused over by the case of eggs. Old Cooper would pick up a couple eggs every time around and put them in his pocket. About the second time around, he had three or four eggs in his coat pocket.

There was old Lloyd Newman, he was a character. Anyway, he'd come around the counter, pat old Cooper on the back, and say, "Hi! How are you this morning, Coop?" Cooper wouldn't say much.

Lloyd Newman would make believe like he was picking something off the floor. He bumped against

old Cooper, and he bumped against the pocket that had the eggs in it. So you know what happened. Old Lloyd Newman said, "Oh, gee, I am so sorry I bumped into you." Cooper would never say a word. He walked out the store and out in back. Then there was no sidewalk. It was dirt. In the winter-time it would all turn to mud, in summertime to dust.

So, he walks out in back of the store and takes his coat off, turns the pocket inside out, and hangs it out on the back of the wagon. He gets in the wagon and starts up the street. That broke old Cooper from swiping eggs. That was comical, all right. He'd go up to the next store and do the same thing. That would have been George West's store. I would never see him after that. That was something that happened a long, long time ago.

I'd go and have a word with Lloyd Newman, talk about old Coop, old Fly-blow. I'd walk across the street to the Post Office, which is now the library. There was some pleasant ladies that worked in there: Mrs. Bert Cross, Alice McGinn. I have a few words with them at the window. "Well, Bert, I guess I'll see you at the dance next Saturday."

"Oh, yes, I'll be there." Then I would leave, cross the road, up the railroad bank, and start across the railroad track. There would be old Rube Cross, Bert Cross' husband.

I'd say, "Good morning, Rube. Hey, you got quite a pack of mail sacks across from the baggage room." He'd have three or four mail bags that would weight down a wagon. I'd say, "Hey, Rube, why don't you have Uncle Sam get you a jackass to carry those bags?"

He says, "Well, John, they did get a jackass. They got me." So then I'd continue across the track laughing to myself. There was old Frank Turcot. He was a nice guy. He used to have the baggage room. We'd have a few words, talk, pass the time of the morning. Then I'd say my farewell and go on around to the waiting room, depot, or the place where the passengers would buy their tickets. If he

wasn't busy, I'd walk up to the window to see old Bill Himer. I'd say, "Morning, Bill."

Bill would say, "Huloo." And he'd go on tapping at the keys. He was the telegraph operator. I'd watch him a minute or two and say, "Well, see you later, Bill."

"Yup, I'll see you." I'd go out the back door, continue on down. I'd make my way down to the narrow gauge transfer platform. There were a couple of old guys there. They were pleasant fellows.

There was one guy by the name of Spender. I never did know his last name. His first name we'd always call him Spender. And then old Paul Cornwall. He was from Kentucky. He'd start talking and I could never understand him. I'd go on down to the other end of the track, platform. There was one of those old hand-trucks. I'd set there a few minutes and watch across.

I could see that little old boarding house. Mrs. Angle used to run it. She had a granddaughter staying with her. Her name was Bernice Gill. I'd wait for the signal. If I could see a colored rag hanging out on the back porch I would stay away. But if it was a white rag, then I would hurry up, jump down off the platform, and walk pretty fast to the Fowler Hotel. That's where that feed store is now. I'd run up to where Bernice was standing.

I'd know if it was clear because there was a white rag hanging. So, Bernice was standing by the gate. I'd step in the gate and step behind the hedge. I'd hug and go into a clinch the first thing. I'd grab her and hold onto her tight. Oh, she was a beautiful girl. We'd stand and talk a few minutes and make a date for the next time. I'd give a long lingering kiss and tell her I'd see her later. I'd go on down.

At the next door was a big home owned by a man by the name of Drennen. I didn't know the old guy. On the corner was a little convalescent home. Two or three cottages were over there, where TB recovering people would stay.

There was Lillian Brown. She was tall, slim, beautiful brunette, freckle-face. I kind-of liked her but I didn't like her like I liked Bernice. Anyway, I'd stop and have a word or two with her, have a peck on the cheek. "Well, see you later, Lillian."



John Rambottini, at a CAHS fashion show, probably in the 1980s. CAHS Archives.

Incidentally, she's still living. She has a place in the little town of Washington, Nevada County. Then on the corner there was another sour head. Old Claude Wills. There was an old wood yard, run by Wills and Filbrick. That old Claude would get after you. I'd never talk to the old boy. So, I'd pass up old Claude Wills. I'd go on by, never say a word.

Right next door, a lot of times, I could see Bat Reardon. He'd come out of his gate. He had one of those bulldogs with the bowlegs. He looked vicious, looked like he ran into the freight train and the freight train got the worst of it. His nose was poked clear back under his eyes.

Old Bat Rearden was a good-natured guy. His old bulldog looked as though he would chew you up, but he was just a pussycat. I'd continue on and say, "Good morning, Bat." He'd say, "Hi, there John." And I would continue on. I'd get up to the corner where the old dance pavilion was. I'd pause a minute. Sometimes I'd turn around and go up the steps, pause up on the steps for a little while. I'd look the town over, thinking about when the next dance was going to be.

I'd walk down the stairs, cross the street, which was then the highway. In back of the old Marvin Annex, across and up the road, I would see Mrs. Booth. That would be Elmer Booth's mother. She was always out in the yard, trying to work on her flowers. I know the weeds were getting ahead of her. I said, "Mrs. Booth, your weeds are getting ahead of you. Do you think you will ever catch up to them?"

She said, "No, I don't think I will." And she'd go on hoeing them and I'd go on continuing on up the hill. There I would meet old C. G. Sebring. He was the division superintendent for the SP [Southern Pacific Railroad]. "Hey, morning, Mr. Sebring."

"Good morning, John. I think Momma's waiting up at the gate for you." That would be Mrs. Sebring. Sure enough, there she was. She'd be waiting to talk a little bit. She was a beautiful lady. She was like out of a picture book, and I always looked forward to talking with her. She was very pleasant and beautiful. She had black eyes, as black as the night. Her hair was as black as coal, beautiful, wavy, natural hair.

Just to pass the time of day I'd grab her hand and say, "Well, Mrs. Sebring, we'll see you next time around."

She'd say, "Oh, O.K., John, we'll see you then."

Where I lived was practically, diagonally across the street from where she lived. And that would be about the end of my morning or day.

So, then I would stay around the house until about 4:30. Then I'd start downtown. I would walk pretty fast. Sometimes, I'd take my old Studebaker and ride. I'd get down there in front of the pool hall. There some of the boys would gather.

We'd set out on the sidewalk, dig our heels in the dirt. There were no curbs or gutters then. We would sit and talk about what had happened, that day's events, what we did, what we were going to do, and so on.

It wasn't the end of the day until we saw old Jim Deyser coming across the track. I don't know how many of you people remember old Jim. Well, Jim was an old railroad crossing watchman when the highway went through Colfax. He'd have to flag the cars down if the train were switching back and forth, and old Jim would get off of work about 4:30, five o'clock. We would see him. We would set there and watch him bobbing up and down, crossing the track, coming up closer to the sidewalk. When he'd reach the Bigfoot Murphy's saloon he would stop, look up the street and down the street and then head in our direction.

When we see him coming, we'd get up one at a time and lean up against the building behind us and stand there and wait. Here comes old Jim and he would laboriously, with a great effort, occupy the spot where he had just vacated. Anyway, he'd get himself set down and his heels dug into the bank, pull his old pipe out of his pocket, knock out the ashes out on the sidewalk, fill it with new tobacco. Then he'd put it into his mouth and light it. He'd take two or three matches before he got it lit.

Then, he'd be pretty well contented, puffing away, smoking his old pipe, deep in thought I guess, and pretty soon we knew what was going to happen.

We saw it happen before. A big old hound dog would come walking down the street, so happy. He'd have his tail in the air, trotting along. As he got closer to Jim, he slowed down.

When he got up to Jim Deyser, he'd stop. He'd walk up to Jim kind of slow, sniff him up and down, lick

the back of his ears, lick his neck, sniff up and down his back, and he'd step up and hoist his leg, and wet all over him. That was nothing. We didn't think nothing of it. We saw it happen before. So, the old dog would turn around and sniff, and he'd seem to be pretty well satisfied with what he did. Then, he'd trot on down the streets, tail up in the air.

Pretty soon, here come another little dog half his size. Well, he couldn't reach Jim to lick him in back of the ears, so, he'd put his front feet on his back and reach up that way and lick Jim in back of the ears, back of his neck. Then he'd do the same thing. He'd jump down, walk up behind Jim, sniff up and down, and hoist his leg, and squirt all over Jim.

Pretty soon one of the boys would say, "Hey, Jim, you know that dog is wetting all over you?"

Old Jim was kind of crabby. So, he says, "You suppose I don't know it? It's good for the rheumatism." So, he'd go on puffing at his pipe.

About the time that his pipe would go out, he'd do the same thing in reverse, get up off of the sidewalk with a great effort. It was a job for him to get up and stand straight up, and he'd get out in the middle of the street and look up the street and look down the street, head himself in the right direction. Then, he would head down the street with his bobbing walk, and then he'd fade off into the night towards his nest. That was about the end of Jim Deyser's evening.

I thank you folks for being patient and listening to this little piece of history that's been long since gone by. I don't think that there are many left now that remember old Jim, but he was quite a town character.

Oh, I had a little more to add about old Fly-blow Cooper. Every time he'd go up the street with his old wagon, his garbage barrels, there would be a cloud of blow flies would follow him up the street. You know, all of the merchants in Colfax would seem to be happy when he'd leave town because it'd seem that all of the flies would follow him. That was the last of old Coop.

Organizing the CAHS Archives for easier research

***Editor's note:** The story of the CAHS Archives began with the group of 41 charter members who founded the CAHS in 1985. The founders proposed to preserve local history by compiling stories about the community's people and buildings, hold meetings featuring speakers on local history topics, preserve life stories of early residents, and start working on the establishment of a museum in Colfax. To accomplish these goals, they needed a location to store the documents, photos, and historical items that were collected. The archives room serves as a place to store items that are not being displayed in the museum, and it is also a place where CAHS volunteers and members of the public can do research about local history. Since the start, many volunteers have spent thousands of hours in that endeavor. In future issues of this newsletter, we will publish additional articles about the CAHS founders, the museum, and the materials in the archives room.*



Some of the binders at the archives containing research and documents. The contents of each binder are being recorded in the archives database with descriptions, accession numbers, and location on the archives shelves. Photo by Roger Staab.

By Roger Staab

During 2012 -2013, the CAHS Archives were moved from a small room to a much larger room at the Sierra Vista Center. Many members of the CAHS were involved with the move and the reorganization of the new archives. As part of that effort, Tom Passanisi became the Director of the

Archives and he had the task of bringing the archive records and processes up to date. A database program from Australia was selected because of its simplicity and low cost.

Tom began processing the contents of our archives using the database program, along with auditing the information on hand regarding our artifacts

and photographing them. Several of the items were well documented on paper at the time of their donation, but some donations were listed in vague terms such as 15 photos, multiple kitchen items, etc., without a clear tie between the paperwork documentation and the items themselves. In addition, numerous binders and files had been added to the archives by past volunteers when researching a particular building history, family name, etc.

For a number of reasons these early efforts at organizing the archives stalled. In 2019 Swend Miller and Roger Staab agreed on a plan to restart the stalled work and further organize the archives' contents. This latest effort consisted of three primary steps.

1. Additional shelving was procured for the archives room located in the Sierra Vista Center. This allowed boxes of items to be moved from under and on top of tables to marked shelving that could be entered into the database as a location for each item.
2. A complete inventory was conducted of items on display at the Colfax Heritage Museum in the Passenger Depot. Item accession numbers, if any, and locations were noted.
3. The database that Tom Passanisi had started was adopted as the means to eventually catalog every item in the collection with its description, a photo of it, its location in the archives or museum, and how the society acquired it if the donor was known.



Some of the shelves in the CAHS Archives where physical objects are stored, including historical copies of *The Colfax Record*, local artifacts, period clothing from 1800–1940, local WW II memorabilia, and maps and pictures of the Colfax area and the railroads. Photo by Roger Staab.

The database allows one to search the records using keywords or phrases. To date over 3200 listings have been entered in the database, but there are many, many more items still to be catalogued. Yet, even in its incomplete state the database serves as a useful research tool for someone wanting to find or identify items in the collection. By entering one or more keywords or phrases, the collection can be searched for that business, family name, event, etc. Any items in the collection that have the key word(s) in their description will be listed, along with their physical location. In addition to key words, the database can be searched by donor name, physical location of the item, or accession number, thus listing all items donated by a particular person, *or* all items located on a particular shelf in the museum or archives, *or* details on an item whose accession number is known.

Initial effort was focused on the many physical items that have been donated. Meanwhile CAHS has received numerous requests for research on

family members, businesses, etc. Answering these requests has highlighted the value of many of the binders, files, and photos in the archives. Recent efforts have focused on cataloguing the binders and files that have been generated over the years by past volunteers. The database now lists 90 binders and 364 files identified by subject matter, and we are in process of listing key documents or photos that appear within the binders or files as individual entries in the database and thus searchable.

The archives room is open by appointment on Tuesday or Thursday morning if you would like to conduct your own research on pieces of Colfax history or just want to see what is in our archives. In addition, there are plenty of opportunities to participate in the organization and cataloguing of CAHS assets in our archives or helping staff at the museum. If you would like to offer some of your time as a volunteer at either the archives or the museum, please stop by the museum and visit with one of the volunteers or call 530-346-8599.

When you join, how is the money used?

Membership dues and all money raised help us accomplish the following goals:

- Maintain the Colfax Heritage Museum in the SP Passenger Depot building, in Colfax.
- Maintain historical archives in a rented room at the Sierra Vista Community Center, in Colfax.
- Manage a growing collection of archival artifacts and make them available for research.
- Develop a file system to assist persons searching for information on people and history of Colfax and the surrounding area. This includes the database of materials in the museum and archives.
- Preserve and protect a collection of 8,000 glass negatives taken by Grace Hubley, a successful commercial photographer of this area.
- Collect and catalog photographs of early Colfax families since the 1850s.
- Collect, preserve, and transcribe oral histories by local families and individuals.
- Research and compile the history of early buildings in Colfax, with commemorative bronze plaques placed on buildings along Main Street.
- Recognize and register three historical areas (Colfax Passenger Depot, Freight Depot, and the Cape Horn Overlook) as Historical Landmarks with the California State Preservation Commission.
- Research the history of various personalities in Colfax, such as Robert Fowler (aviator) and Pat Jones (journalist) and dedicate monuments to them.
- Pay honorariums to experts who make presentations on historical topics at our quarterly public programs.
- Display archival and historical materials at public events.
- Publish and sell historical publications related to Colfax and other nearby communities.

Please support the local businesses and organizations that support the CAHS

The Colfax Area Historical Society (CAHS) and the Colfax Heritage Museum (CHM) appreciate the support and services that local businesses provide.

The following local businesses and organizations are members of the CAHS, and we appreciate their support. We ask you to support them.

<p>American Legion Colfax Post 192</p> <p>P.O. Box 311 Colfax, CA 95713</p>	<p>Colfax Dental Center</p> <p>120 Whitcomb Avenue Colfax, CA 95713 (530) 346-6244</p>	<p>Colfax Garden Club</p> <p>P.O. Box 1801 Colfax, CA 95713 (530) 346-6215</p>
<p>Colfax General Store</p> <p>6 North Main St. Colfax, CA 95713 rklobner@colfaxnet.com</p>	<p>Grace Hubley Foundation</p> <p>24820 Ben Taylor Colfax, CA 95713 www.gracehubleyfoundation.org</p>	<p>Kurtis H. Fox, M.D., Inc.</p> <p>101 Grass Valley St. Colfax, CA 95713 (530) 346-2281</p>
<p>Sierra Business Services</p> <p>520 South Auburn St, # D Colfax, CA 95713 (530) 346-2455 barbkelly@foothill.net</p>	<p>Sierra Vista Community Center</p> <p>55 School Street, Colfax, CA 95713 (530) 346-8726 svcc@colfaxnet.org</p>	<p>VFW Auxiliary Post 2003</p> <p>P.O. Box 1213 Colfax, CA 95713 President: (530) 636-4242</p>

Join the Colfax Area Historical Society

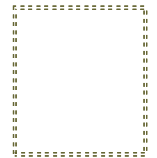
Join the CAHS and support both the Historical Society and the Colfax Heritage Museum. You will receive the

Colfax Cobblestones newsletter four times a year. Memberships are for one year, from January–December.

<p>To join the Colfax Area Historical Society, fill out this form and mail it with a check to: CAHS, PO Box 185, Colfax, CA 95713.</p> <p>Your subscription will begin with the next quarterly issue.</p> <p>Name _____</p> <p>Address _____</p> <p>Address _____</p> <p>City _____ State _____ ZIP _____</p> <p>Email address _____</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> \$20 Individual membership (one person)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> \$25 Family membership (including children)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> \$35 Business or Non-Profit Organization membership (includes an ad in each issue of <i>Colfax Cobblestones</i>)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Go paperless option. We will send a copy of each newsletter to your email instead of mailing you a copy.</p>
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Downtown Colfax, before the 1911 school fire. The Colfax School is the multi-story building shown on the hillside, beyond Main Street. From the Bowers-Keck Collection of the CAHS.



The Colfax Area Historical Society

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Email: museum.colfax@gmail.com

USPS mail: Mail for both the Colfax Area Heritage Museum and the Colfax Area Historical Society is received at PO Box 185, Colfax, CA 95713.

Museum location: The Colfax Heritage Museum is physically located at 99 Railroad St, Colfax, California, in the restored SP Passenger Depot.